

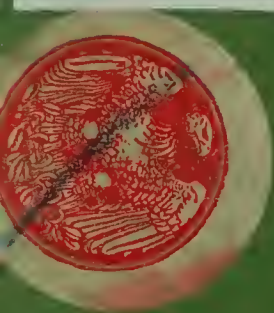
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PLANTATION
MEMORIES
AND
OTHER POEMS



CELIA P. MCGOWAN



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PLANTATION
MEMORIES
AND
OTHER POEMS

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AND OTHER POEMS

By
CLELIA P. MCGOWAN



THE JOHN C. WINSTON COMPANY
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PLANTATION MEMORIES

TO THE FAITHFUL AND BELOVED FRIENDS AND
GUARDIANS OF MY CHILDHOOD;
VENUS SMALLS AND DENIS MACK.

Memories

As I review these memories
Stored in my heart,
Feeling wells up from depths
Below the depths of tears—
When history shall be writ,
Out of the heavy shadows on those years
A steadfast light will shine,
As when Grief wears a smile,
The love between “Mauma”
And those she called “my chile.”

Maum Venus

My mauma cuddles me
Against her ample breast,
Where I find peace and rest;
Her dusky presence,
Wholesome as the night,
Means all within my little world goes right:
I stammer some confession of the day
And quickly say,
“I’m sorry, Mauma”—
Her slight, slow-coming smile
Absolves my sin,
I hear her murmuring, “Das right, das right,
my chile”—

* * * * *

She did not leave us through the dreary years
“After the War”.

When we needs must desert the old plantation,
She grown too old to move,
My father gave her land,
All that was left to give,
While we, her four white “chillun”,
Sent her the wherewithal to live.
We helped to bury her,
And honored her with tears
Born of her rich devotion,
Heaped up through all those years.

Daddy Denis

The mill below the hill
Our castle is:
Adventure waits us there;
A wholesome fear of danger
Adds a zest; and best of all,
There Daddy Denis rules supreme:
From him we learn
Manners, religion, law,
And usefully to handle useful tools,
Hammer, and plane, and saw.
I read the testament
Some sultry summer noon,
His dinner hour,
And as the power
Of God's eternal truth
Shapes from my childish lips,
His kindly eyes look far away,
And he replies:
"Ain't I done tell you so,
Lilla Missy?
Ain't I done tell you so?"

Clárinda

“Why Clárinda!” My mother’s gentle voice
Holds an unwonted tone.

“Why Clárinda, I am ashamed of you,
Have I not taught you
That each human life
Lies in God’s hands?

And you come with this heathen cry
That you are conjured,
And are going to die!”

The tall black woman
Only sways and moans,
“He’p me, my missus, he’p,
I sho’ gwine die.”

My mother swift becomes
Avenging seer and prophetess.

“Kneel here, Clárinda,
Kneel here with me, and pray,
That on us, black and white,
God’s grace may fall.”

Armed with a simple sedative,
A counter charm,
Blessed in God’s name,
Clárinda seeks her home
Controlled and comforted,

CLÁRINDA

Yielding herself to sleep
To this refrain:
“Lord Jesus, bless my w’ite folks,
Bless dem all.—Amen—Amen.”

Daddy Sharper

We have a stopping place
Upon the way to school;
A small log cabin
Nestled in a cove.
There Daddy Sharper patiently endures
His painful days;
Old, crippled, sick, and almost blind,
But oh, so cheerful, courteous and kind.
We children love him,
Love to bring him small supplies
Sent from the "big house" store,
Or still more valued medicine,
Craved of "Mass' William"—
The idol of his slaves,
Lawyer, physician, friend,
Our father serves them all.
He gave this poor old man
To us, a special charge,
And he accepts with dignity
Which never fails some offering in return;
The cabin has an ample hearth of stone
Where back-logs ever burn.
There we explore
For roasted corn,

DADDY SHARPER

Chestnuts, or sugar yams

Reserved each day—

We linger as we may, giving the daily greeting,

“Mother sends this, Daddy Sharper,

How do you feel to-day?”

I see the trembling nod

Which punctuates his slow reply,

“Po’ly, tang Gawd, my missus,

Po’ly, tang Gawd.”

Big John

We called him "Big John,"
Mauma's eldest son;
And like our mauma
With a heart of gold,
He served us with no difference
In the years
After the tale of slavery had been told.
I am the mistress now,
And "Big John"
Guards my frail young brother
As his own.
One day I hear commotion near the pond
Which feeds our mill race;
There I find my brother
To all appearance drowned,
And near him "Big John"
Still, and cold, and gray.
Both were restored;
John could not swim,
With heavy clothes and shoes
He had plunged in
To save "Mass' Eddie"
Sinking near the dam—
And should we try to praise him,
He would say:

BIG JOHN

“W’at dat you t’ink you talkin’ bout, you all?
Fo’ Gawd, I ain’ done nuttin’,
I ain’ done nuttin’ ’tall.”

Chloe

Chloe is tall, and beautiful, and brown;
I hear her singing as she strips the leaves
From the up-standing corn;
A wild, primeval grace
Informs her movements;
A fire-worshipper,
She lifts her face
And offers her libation to the sun
In those rich harmonies
Peculiar to her race.
She plays her given part
In our well-ordered life,
And yet I always feel in Chloe
A certain pride of place—
She showed me once a ring,
“It cum f’om Af’ica
Hid in my mudder’s ha’r.”
A strange and mystic thing
Hand-wrought of greenish gold,
Two snakes are intertwined,
Tail in the mouth of each,
And Chloe whispering
A legend of a King—
How came the ring to be among my treasures?

CHLOE

Chloe, near death,
Summoned her childhood's friend,
Eager and strained
She pressed the ring on me.
"Missy, no nigger ain' nebber see dis ring—
Needer no po' w'ite trash.
Dis ring kin mek yo' free.
I want it way it b'long,
Wid quality—"
And so she died in peace,
Her end attained.

OTHER POEMS

TO MARY MILES MCGOWAN

To
MARY MILES MCGOWAN

To a District Nurse

In all the ways of suffering

Her feet are set,

Laughter and love of life

Look from her eyes, and yet

She deals with death and darkness unafraid.

To Christ in need

“The ministering angels came.”

Of her, the sick and sad at heart

Will say the same,

And bless the coming of this tall, fair maid.

*

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Night-Watch

In the dark of the moon,
When the blue-black sky
Is pricked out in patterns of light,
I keep watch in the night.
Dare to stand naked
I who have sinned,
All the places of mind and soul
Swept through by a winnowing wind.
Come out of space to me,
Ride on the wind;
Burn stars to blaze your way!
I who have sinned
Shun not your fiercest ray,
Ask for no ruth;
Breathless I wait for you
Soul-searching Truth!

By Night

By night the mountains loom immensely high,
Tempting my thought to scale some pinnacle.

I love the little rounded hills,
Soft as a woman's breasts,
Leaning against the sky.

The open sea beckons, and lures, and calls,
Tempting my thoughts to own her mastery.

I love the harbor;
There each welcoming light,
Doubling itself in rippling lines,
Laughs at the night.

By night, by night, beloved,
The cruel distance looms on land and sea,
Heart-breaking high and wide.
I long for restful hills and harbor lights:
These things mean you to me.

Remembrance

I dream, and forget it all,
But the dream comes back
On the tide of Remembrance.
Light, from the gleaming sands
Beyond a dark line of wrack,
 Holds my sight
As I walk on the quiet sea, walk quietly.
Across the wrack of forgotten souls
Are the out-stretched hands
Of those held in remembrance.
 When we meet,
No tide from the hungry heart
 Of the wildest sea,
Could bring what flood tide of Remembrance
 Brings to me —
Dreaming of Death is sweet!

Chopin

(a) *Nocturne*—(b) *Ballade*—

(a)

You hear the drowsy challenging of birds.

The patient trees compose themselves to sleep.

A wanton breeze intrudes upon their rest.

There is a movement as of huddling sheep.

A gallant mocking-bird pours forth such notes,

As break the silence into shivering rills

Of sound, which if you listen will return

In quivering echoes from the answering hills.

There come repeated calls from mate to mate.

A rhythmic motion through the ripening wheat:

The hopeless wailing of a wild beast trapped,

And always water, lapping at your feet.

You shudder at the plaint of some small owl

Upon his own nocturnal business bent.

Be still, and you may hear a well-loved voice

Fall on your heart, a meteor, passion spent.

* * * * *

(b)

Is there a woman singing?

One who would barter with Death

CHOPIN

For the breath of a flickering life?
Is a mother's voice winging its way
To some region of light?
Where the child's soul drifts
Until caught in the mesh of that song,
Which impels its return
To the arms which yearn to enfold it.
Sense the woman's release from the strain,
As she slowly sinks down, hushing her sobs,
And drying her tears in the hem of her gown.

Hush! Hear the low tones of a lover urgently pleading,
And those of her so besought who would stay the
murmuring flood:

Will this whispering end in that kiss extolled as divine?
The best wine from the wine-press of life:
Will the wine-press yield wine, or heart's blood?

Can you count a wife's racing pulse beat in time with
those galloping feet?

He is gone! the little ones sleep, this hour is her's,
set apart—

Does she hear the mad roar from that hell, the boom
of the guns, the shriek of the shell?

She hears only those galloping feet, as they trample
their way through her heart.

Lucrezia Bori

When Bori sings for Italy,
In rippling rills and trills,
The romance-laden thrills
Of the laughter and the tears
Hoarded up through all the years,
Fill to overflowing
Our captivated ears.

When she sings for France,
Fine art takes a part
In the gracious gay duet
She renders,
As she stages
The dance for all the ages,
Entrancing Minuet.

And for England—
How the pure,
Quaint demureness
Of each song,
Goes along
With the genius of a people,
Slow and sure,
Brave and strong.

LUCREZIA BORI

When the singing is for Spain!
The passion and the pain,
And the grace
Of that race,
Tear her heart out
In the story
Of the glory
That was Spain.

The Stars Look Down on Us

The stars look down on us,
Toy earth, and pygmy race;
Measure life's little span,
And wonder at God's plan;
We dare return their gaze
And marvel at God's ways;
Eternal suns, his giants,
Moving eternally, through endless space.

Spring Tide in the Marsh

The tide is up in the marsh,
The full moon pushes her way
Through the eastern sky;
She hurries the sunset
To spill mauve and opal,
And dye the flood tide
As it creeps through the green of the marsh.

A Fancy

Day is the bride of the Sun,
They breed the life in the Earth
And nurture the children of men—
Night and the Moon are lovers,
They meet and embrace,
Are parted, and meet again.

Pomegranate

God walked in the garden at dusk,
The scent of musk-roses pervaded the place,
And trees and flowering plants
In a patterned confusion
Lent grace to the land.
The first two of our race
Played like children
At hiding and seek;
Eve suddenly came face to face
With the Lord God of Hosts;
Scarcely daring to speak,
Meek and lowly she prayed,
"Is all well in thy sight,
Oh, Lord God, is all well?"
He looked on her and said,
"It is well,
Save a note which I miss
In all this,
The motif of red,
Clear passionate red,
Without it this pure, pale perfection
Is seemingly dead."
Adam, wearied of waiting, looked forth
From the great, green, glistening screen
Which hid him from Eve,

POMEGRANATE

Still unnoticed, he grasped
The stiff, thorny branches with hands
Impelled by the tide which rose in him,
And choked him with rage
In the very presence of God.
Eve roaming the garden next day,
Came on flowers, in-set to dark green,
Flowers pulsing with red,
Rich, passionate red,
Where the sharp thorns had been,
And a fruit which seemed good in her sight;
She ate, and accepted her fate
As the mother of men.

* * * *

To this day pomegranate in flower
Is symbolic of passion and power.

An April Day

This is an April day!

Between the showers
The Sun-god blazes out, as who should say,
“Come forth, come forth, ye flowers,
This is an April day!”

This is an April day!

The wind sifts through the pines,
The cardinal renews last season's lay;
His mate nests in those vines
Which to his love-lilt sway.

This is an April day!

Youth's ready tears are falling,
Such is Youth's way.
Mirth clears the skies like sunshine, blythely calling
“This is an April day!”

—*By courtesy of the Poetry Society of South Carolina*

The Cardinal Bird

Oh, Cardinal bird!
How came there a flute in your throat?
Each full, flexible note
Seems to seek a mate eager, yet shy—
“God dropped the flute from the sky.”

Who painted you palpitant red
And crested your head?
Loyal knight of garden and grove,
Where you flash like a flame—
“Baptized at the cross is our claim.”

Are you choir-master?
Each morn to assemble the birds,
And lead in the melodies
Born to the swing
Of Night's wings in her flight—
“Easter morning the angels said ‘sing’.”

Flower Voices

If a lily were to sing,
How pure, how white
Would be the tones,
How clear each ringing note
From her slim throat.

If a rose were granted voice
In color-tones,
How rich, how full,
How subtly strong
Would be the song.

If a golden-tongued hybiscus
Should unfold herself in song,
The palpitating, saffron-colored flame
Would rise to heights divine
Warming human hearts like wine,
Triumphant tone and color
To acclaim.

* * * * *

Wild Roses

Scented splashes of wild-rose pink
Spilled from a quivering sky,
When rain breaks through
Before sunset's hue
Will consent to die.

Mist

At night mist lies close to Earth,
Like a wet garment
Clinging to one wearied with swimming.
Morning brings strength renewed,
Wide-flung arms
Tear the mist into shreds,
Lost in the eastern glow
Brimming to overflow
And drench Earth in sunshine.

* * * * *

Night's Diamond Ring

The dusky queen has lost her ring,
On the open floor of the sky,
 Faint circlet of light
 With a setting of gold,
From which has fallen a diamond star,
 See! it lies on the floor nearby;
 The queen is careless,
Again and again she loses her ring,
 Again and again
 The children of men
 Exclaim,
See! the new moon and the star,
How close together they are!

The Moon Slips through the Clouds

See how the moon slips through the clouds!
They finger strangely at her shining robes,
And as from silver strings,
High, weird, winged harmonies
Take flight through the night.

Far down below, the sea-soaked fisher folk
Hear these and prophesy—
“How the wind whistles and sings,
The moon will fill tonight—
Look at that mackerel sky,
Foul weather is what it brings.”
See! How the moon slips through the clouds
In fright of the night.

At Sunset

My western window
Looks from under trees
Across an open square
To where a fountain plays:
There, suddenly revealed,
A swarm of sparkling bees
Assault a crystal comb,
In which, like molten honey,
The sun's last rays
Are for a moment sealed.

Trees in Winter

Who loves the trees when the first faint shadow of
green appears;

A wood-nymph's veil,
Lost in her tremulous haste to escape from Spring,
Who accounted her frail?

Not I! Give me the trees clad in brown tints,
As soft as the brown on a thrush's breast—
While they stand in the infinite calm of passionless
waiting,

I love them best.

Who loves the trees when they hide
As did Adam and Eve in the garden of old,
Fashioning garments of leaves,
Lest Jehovah, perhaps, should consider them bold?

Not I! Give me the trees unashamed
In their clean, naked beauty and strength,
Or draped in windings of snow,
As a sculptor would drape their sinuous length.

Who loves the trees when arrayed in magnificent robes
For the sacrifice.

Crimson and green and gold, each vying with each
To offer the richest prize?

Not I! Give me the trees
Pencilled as delicate etchings against the sky;
Their rooted strength spelling out, in reserve of force,
Life dying but seems to die!

Parnassia

(A delicate white flower, native in the Blue Ridge ranges)

Roaming the mountain ridge

In search of distant view or prospect wild,
I chanced upon a most exquisite flower;
A lovely human child.

No mountain laurel this!

Nor autumn's royal gift, the golden rod;
Her mien suggests the dainty bloom which starred
The hill the Muses trod.

Shield, as of Innocence,

Upholds the slender stem in perfect grace;
The tracery of God's own hand is seen,
Alike in flower and face.

The Swamp

The moon goes into the swamp
With an innocent air,
She bathes, the water seems clear,
And ripples about her
Like glistening hair;
Night beckons me on,
And soon I follow the moon.

The sun seems to shun the swamp,
I only see shadow;
The water is thick and brown
And day seems to frown
On my venturing in,
As though shadow were sin.

* * * * *

Shadow must be,
And sin,
The question is,
Venturing in.

—By courtesy of the Poetry Society of South Carolina

St. Helena Island

St. Helena! For centuries untold
You've nestled here at Carolina's feet
Braving the ocean, yet not so very bold,
Since your out-standing guards,
 "The Hunting Islands",
Link up a saving zone
 To offer you.
Regardless of this belt
The tide comes slipping through
 Like loving hands!
You yield in ecstasy,
 Knowing that strands
 Held by the Fates,
Return your roving lover to your feet.

* * * * * *

Stuartia

Stuart, studying plant life,
Came on this unknown flower;
Like pale Magnolia buds
In fragile miniature,
Crowning St. Helena
For one short week in spring;
The four cupped petals hold a purple glow,
As though the flower loneliness must know,
And would pulse from its heart some living thing.

Sometimes, held careless, in a careless crowd
The eyes fall on a face
Which is a thing apart,
Clutching the heart with loveliness and grace.
Such is the lovely flower
Known to bloom only there,
And there but in one place.

Dreaming

She lies between twin streams
Which bring her tribute where they meet,
As lovers lay their offerings at the feet of one beloved.
Her stately homes, her many domes and towers,
Her old tiled roofs where ragged sky-lines creep,
Bewitch the mind as Venice does,
Venice, with all her memories enshrined,
And water-lapped to sleep, and dream, and sleep.
So sleeping, she dreams of her past:
She bled in the talons of War,
 She shuddered to earthquake,
 And shook to the hurricane's blast.
Ghosts walk on the moonless, sheer nights
When the quivering lights in the sky
Seem to vie with her harbor lights.
 Have they whispered a spell
The palmetto trees dare not tell,
As they gossip and nod at her portals?
Are they thinking to shatter the poise
Of one listed among the immortals?
Still dreaming, a treasured gem
In the grasp of Tradition withholding the key,
She lies like a jewelled clasp
Hand-wrought for the trailing robes of the restless sea.

Why Summon Sleep ?

Why summon sleep, when I may keep
A wholesome assignation with myself,
In the cool plenitude of darkness,
Which summer nights
Hold for a heat-worn world?
The days are brazen-bold;
No place in them for thought,
No place for thoughts,
Such as slip shyly out
In the face of Darkness.
Memories come,
Crowding in life-like pageantry;
By day memories are ghosts,
Shadows of ghosts,
Shunning themselves!
And what a space for prayer;
God and the soul
A vigil keep,
Why summon sleep?

The Long-Leaf Pines

Great fretted columns, rising free and tall
Uphold dark, incensed shrines,
Which in late Spring

Are furnished forth with waxen tapers:

On some mild, moonless night,
Pale lunar moths drift up on mystic wing
And light them all,

To celebrate the Resurrection in every growing thing.

Creation

Dream a quick dream,
And from the nearest clay
Fashion some semblance
Of the dim-visioned thing.
 Around this embryo
Let thought and fancy stay
 Like mothering angels,
 Night and day;
With brooding of soft wings,
Pressure of wishful hands,
 In such caresses
As will surely bring
Fruition; life to the clay,
Voice, and the power to sing.

Life

I pour out my heart to excess
In a riotous wealth;
I seek to express my soul:
Look on from your hole in the wall
Hermit-miser of Life!
Shut in from the strife,
From the pain and the bliss
Of the ultimate kiss;
Shut in from the rain,
And the snow, and the night:
Stay in, and worship your light;
Here I stand
Drinking Life to the lees!
Better squeeze the last drop from the fruit
And throw down the rind,
Than to hoard it, and find in the end
Only rind.

Dust to Dust

I love the earth,
The actual soil
On which we tread,
From which God gives us daily bread:
I love the clay,
The loam,
The shifting sands,
The crumbling brown and chrome
Of new-ploughed fields—
Better than these,
I love my garden soil
Where I may dig with my own hands;
Knowing it dust of my dust
Which will reclaim me,
When Life's frail hour-glass
Has run its sands.

Translation

When we break the second chrysalis
In groping to the light,
Will new birth
Bring new thoughts and new desires,
Quit of all their earthly fires?
Will we lose the common round
Of day and night?
Credit not that souls live on
And hearts expire!
Should the Angel at the gates of Death require
Such a toll as this,
The soul would surely find a way to die,
Sooner than forget
That you are you,
And I am I.

The Cypress Swamp

Some witchery lures me to a cypress swamp;
In spring,
When quivering loveliness of coming leaves
Shadows forth fluttering lids
On young eyes wakening.—
At summer's height,
When folds on folds of green
Compose a screen,
The stems are silver,
Collecting filtered light about the knees
Of these strange trees.—
In autumn,
All the henna in the world
Seems caught in feathery tufts,
Brushing the sky
To bring the blueness down,
And with the eastern dye
To tint an Indian summer—
When winter comes
And all the swamp is bare,
The witch-craft seems to hold me ever closer;
The shadows in the water
Show each line
As on a cryptic chart,
And every smallest finger on each limb
Plays tunes upon my heart.

Mistletoe

Pray, what is Mistletoe?
Are these strange, dull-green leaves
Congealed regrets?
And are the berries tears
Transmuted into pearls,
As hopes are shaped from fears?

These may be memories,
Set free
To cluster lovingly
On each denuded tree:
Memories nurtured unseen,
When Summer lends the trees
Complete attire
Of usual green.

Magnolia Gardens

Cloud-like scarves,
In shades of lilac,
Drape the trees
In second mourning;
These,
Freed by Winter's death,
Demurely welcome Spring:
Moved by his roving breath
They don light veils of green,
Complete awakening.

Dependent, dark-green vines
Trail up the steadfast pines;
Spaced all along their stems
Are dead-white, half-blown buds;
Like novices
Climbing a convent stair,
Each whispering a prayer.

Beyond, where ample robes
Of white and gold
Fall fold on fold,
Are seen rare jewels
Set in fine enameled green,
Forgot
In Winter's plight
When taking flight;

MAGNOLIA GARDENS

Camellias,
Which in this favored spot
Crowned pale December queen.

When Spring
Would prove his power
A miracle is wrought;
Each of uncounted stars,
Points of God's thought,
Is an azalea flower,
Robbing the sun
Of red in every shade,
Save where the constellations gleam
In full white light arrayed.

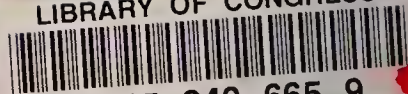
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